

GOD GREATER THAN MAN.

A SERMON

PREACHED JUNE 11TH,

AFTER THE

RENDITION OF ANTHONY BURNS,

BY JOSHUA YOUNG,

MINISTER OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, BURLINGTON, VT.

"THEN PETER AND THE OTHER APOSTLES ANSWERED AND SAID, WE OUGHT TO OBEY
GOD RATHER THAN MAN."—*Acts, 5th chap. 29th verse.*

BURLINGTON:

PUBLISHED BY SAMUEL L. NICHOLS.

Stacy & Jamieson, Printers.

1854.

2/26
Univ. of Chicago

233124

MLA 1360

103 1100

YSA 8811

NOTE.

This Sermon has been the subject of some controversy; it is submitted to the public, that it may stand, or fall, by its own merit.

It was written in the haste of the inexorable weekly preparation for the common Pulpit; that it would ever be put in type was neither in the thought, nor in the desire, of the author, who cannot but express his regret, that so righteous a cause should have so poor an advocate.

If it have one word of Truth, one faithful word for Right and Liberty, give God the praise; if it be false and injurious, no one can lament it more than the author.

S E R M O N .

“ Behold in this thou art not just ; I will answer thee, that God is greater than man.”—JOB XXXIII : 12.

How calm and peaceful is Nature ! The sun rises and sets, the tide flows and ebbs, the seasons change, the planets roll, and there is no jar, no discord, no confusion. Where God reigns there is peace—sweet, holy peace—peace in the world, peace in the state, peace in the heart. Throughout the material universe, what love and concord. System within system plays, but no world impinges against its fellow-world ; no errant comet has ever yet struck the earth.

Such regularity pervades the material creation, such perfect and wise laws control the motion of the planets, that long years beforehand, men foretell that on such a day, hour and minute, the sun, moon and earth will be in a certain position, and on that day

and hour the Eclipse takes place ; and though clouds may conceal the spectacle from actual observation, no one doubts that science was right, and nature faithful. God is never untrue, never unharmonious. Those principles He has declared to be the guides—the controlling powers and forces—the laws of the universe, He never violates. God is never inconsistent—hence, in the natural world, what order and harmony. To every blade of grass is given its drop of dew ; care and kindness reign ; laws of mutual dependence and help prevail for each and all, and each and all fulfil the eternal will. Holy, peaceful, happy nature ! thou hast “ no tear save the fountain, no sigh save the gale.”

But in the world of *human* kind, in the world of *man's* will and ways, how different. What strife and contention—what bitter, burning wrongs, oppressions, slaveries !

Last Sunday, you were without the usual ministrations of this pulpit. In order to attend the meetings of the various religious and benevolent societies that celebrate their anniversaries, according to established usage, during the last days of May, in the city of Boston, early in the week I had left this scene of

beautiful Nature—calm was the Lake, the mountains solemn and grand, peacefulness was over it, and over them, and from horizon to zenith, in the blue depth of sky, not a cloud was seen,—for a spectacle, how different !

I felt like the ancient Hebrew, going up to Jerusalem, to worship in the great temple, and expected to return to you, refreshed and strengthened for the better discharge of my duty as your minister. My intention was to have reported to you what I heard and saw, to have spoken on the various subjects that were discussed, to have brought to you a summary of what was doing in the Church and its kindred associations, for the cause of truth and righteousness ; for the redemption of the world from sin and iniquity, the establishment of Christ's kingdom in the heart and in the earth—the dominion of Him whose advent was heralded by that sublimest chant ever sung by angels, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will to men.”

Brethren, I have no such report to make. I remember only one scene. I have knowledge of only one subject. Such a week I never knew before—New England never knew—our country never knew. Sad

and heart-sick, I have come back, not to tell you what I have witnessed—the papers have attempted to describe the scene, but it cannot be described—the downcast look, the heavy heart, the pale face, the sad tone, the ominous shake of the head, the thoughts and feelings that would not let men sleep—oh, it was a dark week !—but I have come back to fulfil a vow I then and there laid upon my soul, to plead the cause of the slave—the cause of human rights and liberty, with renewed zeal ; to give whatever of ^{talent} God has bestowed upon me, and whatever of influence I am permitted to exert, to the agitation and discussion of this evil, wrong, crime against man, sin against God—American Slavery ; until by its abolition, or, if that calamity must be, by the dissolution of the Union—a separation between the North and the South—there be some part of this Western continent worthy to be called the “ the home of the brave, the land of the Free ”—one free and independent people, whose religion is the gospel of Christ, *not read and preached to suit the oppressor*, and whose God is the Father, not of a portion, but of the *whole human race*.

To plead the cause of the slave is to plead our own cause, to vindicate your claim and mine to the inal-

inable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For the decision which sent back Burns to the hell of slavery, perhaps to be whipped to death in some slave-pen, as poor Sims was, that, and every similar decision, under the compromises of 1850, has struck a fatal blow at the liberty of every citizen of the North, at the liberty of man everywhere. That great provision for the security of human liberty which our English forefathers fought for, for more than ^{two} ~~forty~~ years, and spilled their blood like water; that every man has a right to know why he is seized and imprisoned—this great bulwark of all liberty, together with that other constitutional right, trial by jury, is null and void before the affidavit of a southern man-stealer, who may swear that you, or I, our mother, wife, or sister, is his slave !

But, leaving these aspects of the Fugitive Slave Law to those who claim to have all knowledge upon such subjects, this I may never hesitate to affirm, when opportunity occurs, that it is a wicked law ; unjust, unrighteous, in fearful defiance of the eternal will of God, an outrage upon every generous impulse, and every moral sentiment of man. Nay, it is fearlessly to be asserted, that it is no law, but open

tyranny ; written in the statute book it may be, but in no way is it binding on man's duty of obedience to the powers that be.

Brethren, our religion is vain, and our worship here but solemn mockery, the first moment we depart but a hair's breadth from the great principle, that we ought to obey God rather than man, and that no law can possibly be obligatory upon us, by whomsoever passed, or howsoever enforced, if it come in conflict with the commands of Heaven. Nay, the obligation is to disobey such a law ; to disclaim it. It may cost you your reputation, your friends, your property ; it may cost you your life, but no consideration, either of gain or of loss, no false hope of good results, no base fear of evil consequences affects in the least the morality of the course you may pursue. Duty remains solemn, stern, unalterable ! No earthly power can supercede the authority of conscience ; no human statute annul the law of God. Men may blaspheme, if they will, and scout the idea as they please, but there is a Power superior to Congress, a Law higher than any human constitution. As the sky above us is higher than the cupola of the State House and the dome of the Capitol, and reaches farther than

the boundaries of the nation, so God's government is higher than man's government, and the Divine law broader than human law.

Not, that there is any natural, or necessary antagonism between them. The same God that created man, ordained the state ; and the laws of nations, when they are wise and righteous laws, laws fit to be made, are, in purpose and in spirit, but re-enactments of the laws of God ; re-affirmations of the Eternal Will. That Will once known, and the inevitable obligation is upon us to do it—to do it, be the consequences what they may—for, the moment you doubt the expediency and duty of doing what is morally right, that moment you impugn the laws of God as unwise and unsafe : laws which He has established in truth and justice for the moral conduct of His creatures. The moment you distrust the good consequences, the ultimate benefit and blessedness of implicit obedience to the commands of Heaven, whatever temporary evils seem to threaten you or your country, as inseparable with such obedience, that moment you are guilty of practical Atheism ; no more, no less. You deny God ; you arraign His wisdom ; you impugn His goodness, and enthrone little man above the Great Being who

made him, and holds him in the hollow of His hand.

As a general proposition, no sane man would ever think of denying, that he is, not only politically, but morally and religiously bound to obey the laws under which he lives. It is plain, however, that the duty of civil obedience is not, *can not* be absolute and unconditional. If that national calamity do occur, that a godless nation so far plots its own destruction as to pass a law which is a gross and daring violation of the moral law of God, subversive of Right, Truth and Justice,—Duty, Patriotism, Morality, Religion, all bid us to disclaim, to disobey the wicked statute.

When thus the requisitions of government and of the higher law of God are conflicting, it is needful that we exercise a strict scrutiny into the principles of our conduct. But if, upon such scrutiny, the contrariety of requisitions appear real, no room is left for doubt respecting our duty, or for hesitation in performing it. With the considerations of consequences, we have no concern ; whatever they may be, our path is plain before us. And rough and thorny as it may be, if we hesitate or refuse to take it, we throw away our manliness, trample on the nature that should be

our pride, and declare to the world that we have no faith in the God of Israel ; no faith in the living God of Truth, and Righteousness ; especially as Christian believers do we deny our master, afraid, or ashamed to take up the Cross and bear it after him whithersoever obedience to His precepts of love and humanity may lead us.

And, if I read aright the stars of heaven, the time is coming, is even now near at hand, when the disciple of Jesus, may be put to the test, and the noble army of martyrs be increased in number. Brethren, in all the solemnity of this hour, and of this subject, I ask you, are you ready ? is your heart fixed ? humbly and before God have you come to a decision ? Is your voice, your heart, your whole influence—if need be, your strong right arm—for Liberty ?

Lest I should be misunderstood, I say again, that it is not possible to exaggerate the terrible evils that may result from a growing irreverence for the laws of the Land,—revolution, and all the horrors of a civil, fraternal war. But, believe me, my hearers, such irreverence cannot be corrected ; such fearful consequences cannot be averted, by the exercise of intimidation, or the infliction of severe punishment, or the

falsification of public sentiment, or by the debauchment of the moral conscience of men. No ! the remedy is not ingenious policy, nor cunning device, nor military despotism ; but, simply and only, the passing of such laws as men *can reverence, and still be men*, and may feel it to be alike their honor and their duty to obey.

There is not a moral writer to be found, who has won any respect in the world, that does not teach the principles I am defending—that God is greater than man, that injustice and unrighteousness are never to be done, by whatever power commanded, and that the divine Rights of Man are superior to all human enactments, to be maintained and defended at all hazards.

Not only all moral writers take this position, but there is not an eminent jurist that has not affirmed the same. Vattel, and all writers on International Law, declare that even the solemn sanctions of a treaty are void, if the provisions are opposed to natural justice. Blackstone says, “ If any human law shall allow or require us to commit a crime, we are bound to transgress that law.” Fortescue says, “ The law of nature being coeval with mankind, and dicta-

ted by God himself, is, of course, superior to any other. No human laws have any validity if contrary to this." Coke states, "that when an act of Parliament is against common right, the common law will control it and adjudge such an act to be void." Littleton says: "It is generally laid down that acts of Parliament contrary to reason, are void." Noyes says, "The inferior must give place to the superior, man's laws to God's laws. If therefore any statute be enacted contrary to them, it ought to be considered of no authority." Hobert says: "An act of Parliament may be void from its first creation, as an act against natural equity; for the laws of nature are immutable; they are the *laws of laws*," and Judge McLean declares that "statutes against fundamental morality are void."

Before the tribunal, then, of God and of man, I arraign the Fugitive Slave law, as wicked and infamous—a dark deed of sin—an act of tyranny. And this is the law, merciless, and unrighteous, and bloody, whose crushing weight a great and proud nation has just laid upon one poor black man, literally enforcing it at the point of the bayonet, the mouth of the cannon, and at an expense—for the money-argument always tells—of more than \$50,000!

It is a law opposed to "natural justice." It is an act against "natural equity." It is against "fundamental morality." It is *contrary to the laws of God*. It is all this, because it is an enactment in favor of slavery—an enactment that takes away the inalienable rights of not merely one man, here and there, but of more than three millions of our fellow men, and extinguishes the last, forlorn hope of the poor Slave, who sees no longer, in his nightly watches, the bright North star that once guided him to the near and sheltering homes of the happy and the free. Now, there is no rest, no security for him, but in the snows of Canada, and under the protection of the British crown.

Oh ! to what more deplorable condition can man be subjected, than slavery—not slavery in the abstract, but American, Southern Slavery. Violating every human right, it annihilates all that distinguishes man from, and elevates him above, the beast. It proceeds on the principle that one human being has a right to the absolute control of another ; that the weaker has no right to pursue, but must ever extinguish, his own happiness, when it comes in competition with that of the stronger. Thus does it subvert the whole per-

sonal liberty of man, as a physical, intellectual and moral being. It makes him utterly unlike the creature he is, as he comes from the hand of God. The accountable, reasonable man is degraded from the denomination of person to that of thing ; he becomes a mere appendage to the existence of another, is reduced to the condition of the brute, to be dumb and patient like the driven ox, under the driver's goad.

The very constitution of man proves, that he is by nature, a separate, distinct and complete system, adapted to all the purposes of self-government, and responsible, separately, to God, for the manner in which his powers are employed. With a body which ministers to its own necessities, an understanding by which he can discover truth, and apply it to the objects of life ; with passions which excite, and a will which determines him to action, and a conscience to guide him aright, man feels, *knows*, that he was born for liberty ; that freedom is as absolutely necessary to the true development of his various powers, as the air and sunlight to the growth of the plant.

In the just use and full exercise of his liberty, how does man unfold and display the image in which he is made ; but reduce him to servitude, and you un-

make him, *unman* him ; you chain his limbs, you darken his mind, deprave his passions, annihilate his will, extinguish his conscience ; you rob him of his humanity ; you *crush out of him the very consciousness that he is a man.*

This is the terrible wrong and enormity of slavery ; this constitutes it the “ sum of all villanies,” that it makes a Man a thing, a human being a chattel, the conscious Soul a piece of merchandise, to be bought and sold ; a horse to be ridden, a dog to be whipped,

“ a tool

Or implement, a passive thing employed

As a brute mean, without acknowledgment

Of common right, or interest in the end.”

If all the other inhumanities, the tremendous wrongs, the horrid cruelties the system necessarily and inevitably involves, were only imaginary—if it were not true, as it is, that slavery violates the most sacred relations in life, each and all of them ; makes marriage a mockery, an alliance of shame, to be formed and broken with equal indifference “ giving the young woman no protection from licentiousness, sundering husband and wife, selling them into distant regions, and then compelling them to break the sacred tie and contract new alliances, in or-

der to stock the plantation with human cattle ;” invades the paternal relation, severing mother and child, annihilating the obligations, and outraging the sanctities of parentage ; if, I say, it were not true, as it is, that slavery is thus cruel, thus infernal, mocking at tears and heart-breaking grief, and applying the driver’s lash to hush the sob of anguish unutterable ; if the southern slave were the happiest being on the face of the earth, the great and fundamental objection to the system *still remains, unmodified, unmitigated*. Slavery does not, and *can not* recognise the greatness of Man, the dignity of human nature, the ineffable worth of the immortal soul, the high, solemn fact of those Eternal relations which make Man greater than the universe, the son of the living God ! Its foundation is laid in falsehood, its spirit is contempt ; deliberate, relentless hostility to the expansion of every faculty that belongs to man, as man, enters into—makes up the very essence of slavery.

The Slave is not treated as a Man, is not looked upon as a man, as a fellow being. “ You may call him such, but he is not to you a brother, a partaker of your nature, and your equal in the sight of God.

You view him, you treat him, you speak to him as infinitely beneath you, as belonging to another race. You have a tone and a look towards him, which you never use towards a man. Your relation towards him demands, that you treat him as an inferior creature. You cannot, if you would, treat him as a Man. That he may answer your end, that he may consent to be your slave, his spirit must be broken, his courage crushed ; he *must fear you*. A feeling of deep inferiority must be burnt into his soul. The idea of his rights must be quenched in him, by the blood of his lashed and lacerated body.”

Brethren, in the name of Christ, at whose altar we are worshipping to-day, I pronounce American Slavery to be a monstrous wrong, a heinous sin before High Heaven, provoking the righteous indignation of God, who will come in terrible judgment upon this nation, if we do not, away with it !

Yet, to maintain, and continue this enormous wrong and sin, we have consented—we of the North—to return to all its horrors, every poor fugitive that escapes its chains, and asks our protection. And when noble men, in the fear of God, in the state and in the church, in the forum and in the pulpit, have dared to

lift up their voice against it, and the compromises that perpetuate it, they have been branded as fanatics, thrown out of office, dismissed from their parishes, politically proscribed, socially ostracised ; and all this, not in the South, *but in the North*—in New England, in Massachusetts ; God forbid, I should say in Vermont ! But the truth, that was told four years ago, the present year more than confirms. Boasted measures of peace have been found to be but measures of aggression, and of strife. Promised finalities but the beginning of evil. Are you surprised ? I am not. Do men gather grapes of thorns, and figs of thistles ? Is the dove born of the serpent ? Oh ! when will men believe in God—believe that throughout the universe, *no wrong can be done which the Eternal Justice will not ultimately, and relentlessly put to shame !*

Now, we raise the cry of repeal, and ask to have that undone which we never should have consented to have had done. I believe we shall ask in vain. Speculatively, repeal is possible ; practically and actually, it is not. Was ever the public sentiment of the North more distinctly and emphatically expressed, than within the last six months, by our remonstrances sent to

Congress against the Nebraska bill, and were ever Colonial petitions spurned from the foot of the British throne with more contempt, than those remonstrances have received from the American Congress? Our right of petition, our privilege of remonstrance, has not been denied us, but insult and abuse are the answers we have got.

What then remains to be done? We have the ballot-box. Well, brethren, if you have faith in that, use your right of suffrage as *men*; responsible, firstly to your God, and secondly, to your country. But for one, I tell you frankly, and sadly, I have lost all faith in political action, until that party rises which shall take God for its leader, the Gospel of Christ for its platform, and adopts for its resolutions, as embodying its principles of action, the two great commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, and thy Neighbor as thyself.”

Slavery is a moral wrong—a *sin*;—we must have a *moral* repentance—a moral reformation. The North and the South must prostrate themselves together, in sackcloth and ashes, before an offended God; *they are both guilty*. Or, if the South will not yield, then must the North say:—“I abjure it all,—I can-

not longer consent to the wicked thing—I appeal to the God of Justice and the God of Might, in whom I trust !”

We must go back to the first and original compromise—to the Constitution—and purge that of every section and clause, which, by any possible interpretation, recognises the right of property in man. We must confess, that our Fathers sinned when they compromised with wrong, and must pluck up that first seed, root out that early planting of falsehood and of mischief which has produced the whole serpent brood of compromises since. Great and good men they were, confessedly—the framers of the constitution—but they were men, erring and fallible men ; and they did wrong, when, in order to secure the white man’s liberty, they surrendered the black man’s liberty ; when, in order to be free themselves, they enslaved others, or consented to their enslavement. To say that that first compromise was necessary, *is to offer an excuse and a justification for every compromise since, and every compromise to come, with wrong.*

The disease of which this nation is dying, the canker that is eating at its vitals, is *Constitutional Idolatry*. The exaggerated sacredness of the American

Constitution, as an instrument whose wisdom is never, in any respect, to be called in question ; whose entire and absolute perfection is never to be doubted, (albeit allowing of Slavery as it does,) has done more to cloud the moral perceptions of this people, to debauch the consciences of men, than can be told. To it—to the Constitution, by man made, and by man expounded—we are told we must look for the highest rule of action ; not to the God-made Conscience, as enlightened and purified by the Gospel of Christ. We are told that there is no higher law than the Constitution ; no authority more reliable and imperative.

Confessedly, in most regards, it is a noble document ; but even the sun has spots. If it were only faithful to its preamble—the noble Declaration of Independence—it were worthy to be enclosed within the lids of the Bible. But, if we would do our whole duty by it, and to it ; if we would make this fountain pure, whence we drink our political life ; if we would avert the evils that now threaten the Union, and guide this great Republic to the accomplishment of that destiny the wise have predicted for it, and the good prayed for, the *Constitution must be amended !* We must begin at the *beginning*, and thus, every prop

and support of Slavery, as a National Institution, being removed, it shall fall, to rise no more—unhonored and unwept !

But I must stop ; already have I trespassed upon your patience, and more than exhausted my time. ⁴¹ I have spoken long. God forgive me if I have not spoken well. But beyond my utterance are the deep and sad feelings of my heart, and, at such a time, and for such a cause, I feel how poor and inadequate are any words.

O Brethren ! you know your duty. If I fail in mine, or in over-zeal, exceed it, blame me, but *respect the Cause*. As men, as patriots, as moral beings, responsible to God, pledge yourselves, at this altar, from this time, henceforth and forever, to its furtherance—the abolition—the entire extinguishment of slavery ; first, Slavery in our own country—then, throughout the world !

Our Forefathers—I have spoken of them. With you all, I honor them, and revere their memory. One misstep they took, and none would exhort us so earnestly as they, to correct the error, if they were on earth now. For the sake of Right, and Justice, and Conscience, they “feared not to stand up against

Kings and Nobles, and Parliament and People. Better did they account it, that their lonely bark should sweep the wide sea in freedom ; happier were they, when their sail swelled to the storm of winter, than to be slaves in palaces of ease. Sweeter to their ear was the music of the gale that shrieked in their broken cordage, than the voice at home, that said, " Submit, and you shall have rest." And when they reached this wild shore, and built their altar, and knelt upon the frozen snow and the flinty rock to worship, they built that altar to Freedom, and their noble prayer was, that their children might thus be free ! Oh, let us, their sons, remember the prayer of their extremity, and the great bequest which their magnanimity has left us."

Or, if we have forgotten this, and our hearts respond not to their noble spirit, then, let us remember, with fear and with trembling, that "there is a God who keeps the black man and the white, and hurls to earth the loftiest realm that breaks His just, Eternal Law."